

Oct 27 1930
Ag on Humanities

I should like to present as record of my own convictions arguments against the continuance of a division of the Humanities within the RF.

In presenting such arguments it is necessary first to state what I understand to be explicit and implicit in the existence in the RF of a division or group concerned with the Humanities. As I understand such a group both from its record up to now and its probable organization in the future, it would

- a) attempt to aid in the study and/or preservation and/or further advancement of the arts, literatures, or other expressions of the spirit of man in various regions or races or historical periods of mankind
- b) be a part of the RF and therefore in some degree be associated with the already existing groups of IHD, MS, SS and NS
- c) not confine its interest to the United States of America

Against the inclusion of such interests in the RF and on the lines assumed above, a number of considerations appear to me to be decisive, without however in any way implying that such interests as are usually called the humanities are in any way undeserving of aid conceived and executed along entirely different lines and through organizations or individuals independent of the RF. I must confess moreover that until my experience of living in Europe I would have welcomed the addition of a division of the Humanities to the existent RF program.

The essential nature of scientific laws, and the validity of scientific knowledge lies admittedly in the high degree of constancy with which these laws and facts can be verified objectively by observers widely separated either in time, space or sympathies. The canons of artistic taste on the other hand, the laws of man, the arts and even the mores of different times and regions are distinguished first by the intense subjective feelings they express (and sometimes produce in others), and second by the impossibility of agreement between observers or appraisers in default of some means of objective verification. Discoveries, for example, of the laws of the electromagnetic field or the etiology of malarial

fever, have a constant and verifiable validity and interest for Slav, Teuton, Latin and Oriental intellects without involving temperaments, mores, or spiritual integrity. The same cannot be said of the work of French historians, Irish folklore, or the preservation of Chaldean art. All the subjects in the field of the Humanities involve taste and subjective feelings or processes of evaluation and appreciation, in the attempt to verify their significance. Philosophies sometimes, literatures often, and most other art forms nearly always, have moreover an infinitely complex and delicate integrity of spirit. Is the English judgment of an American artist more valid than the American? If a Polish Commission were to support a school for crooning would we respect their evaluation of Rudy Valee? And therein lies the danger to the RF of assuming the role of appraiser or judge of what should be aided within the Humanities. It might be said we only help, we don't judge. It is self-delusion for us to regard the grants by an organization now as widely known as the RF as aid only - they are more than aid, they are selections, and in some instances lethal decisions that, of course unintentionally but none the less really, terminate alternative or competitive projects and causes.

Now, difficult as is the decision to neglect one form of scientific endeavor in favor of another, nevertheless both are at least verifiable and understandable by our own staff charged with the responsibility of decision. But I do not agree that decisions affecting the humanities are like decisions on scientific matters. Aid in the humanities may frequently involve judgments upon forms of expression of the human spirit and evaluation of the taste of others, and I do not believe any board can wisely assume the world-field nor the large power of the RF, in such matters. We should aid freedom and independence in matters of aesthetic creation and appreciation by leaving responsibility to more modest and therefore more numerous and representative supporters. How could one small group in any

nation ever obtain the cultivation of spirit necessary to set the world as its field, the humanities as its subjects, and important discriminations between individual or national aesthetic expressions as its activity?

Let us look for a moment at Americans with European eyes, and here I paraphrase the opinions of two European friends who know the RF well:

"An enviable people, rich, energetic, practical, youthfully idealistic, with the sciences rapidly improving. Gifted in the knowledge of the humanities above Europeans? Tolerant, well-informed and reflective? A country of mature and catholic critics of the arts? A land as rich in scholars and creative thinkers as it is in money? The best judges of what and how to aid in European or Asiatic cultural activities? Well not yet. If they wish to help us with medical schools, with our science faculties, with our departments of health, let us by all means consider their ideas or take their aid - their record of accomplishment and their practical minds in these things prove them competent even if they are given to luxuries we can't afford. They also know how to run libraries. But they don't usually master more than two of our languages, they cannot know what our history, our arts, our literature really mean to us - there is no way to judge that from the outside. Of course if they give us money to spend as we choose, that's very nice - they don't employ foreigners much ----- but why don't they stick to what they know how to judge?"

So it goes, even when they do not refer to any fear of American culture and valuations overwhelming European civilization - the fear which André Siegfried voices openly, and which is a real danger for Europe regardless of our blameless intentions.

"De gustibus non disputandum" is a precept of politeness, but as an observation it is exactly wrong for it is precisely matters of taste (and not matters of scientific fact) that always will call for dispute - and the disputes would be none the less if tastes were subsidized or neglected by the RF.

From quite another point of view, what mutual programs could a division of Humanities have with the other divisions of the RF? What collaboration is possible, what mutual criticism between divisions could be well enough informed to be helpful? What possible justification of the time spent, for example, by a public health expert or a plant physiologist in attempting to discriminate in office conferences or informal consultation between proposals in Slavic iconography?

Neither in subject matter nor method of handling does a division of the Humanities belong, to anyone's advantage, in collaboration with three scientific divisions which have found even their own fields so large that intensification and focussing of effort is planned.

A final argument is capable of being misunderstood as gross materialism. But in the present world, with the exception of parts of the United States, I would not consider the greater needs of mankind to be aesthetic and cultural. I used to think so when I lived here, for my health and environment were agreeable and the immense grant in aid of bad taste given by mass production made me rebellious against further "materialism". I know man cannot live by bread alone - but if we come to add to the diet it is well to remember that one man's meat is another man's poison. Is it not true that throughout the world there still are more people and more nations possessing a culture to which our money could add but little and yet lacking scientific knowledge which we are qualified and invited to aid, than people well advanced in scientific knowledge who would consider us as competent judges of their cultural needs? The funds of the Foundation, the example of its policy, and the judgment and energies of its officers, are needed and welcomed in the advancement of useful, demonstrable, indubitable, scientific knowledge. The very surplus of wealth and the creation of the Foundation by which we are enabled even to consider these questions, was based upon economic and social organization and a knowledge of natural sciences, and the promise seen in the application of medical knowledge to human welfare. "All criticism is a form of autobiography" - and from my experience I cannot consider spiritual quickening or aesthetic gratification as being the primal need "for the wellbeing of mankind", in a world of men still as expensively ignorant of their bodies, minds, and physical environment as they quite remedially are.

ALAN GREGG

October 27, 1930